STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

The Death of S. F. Tenant Hero Ted Gullicksen

We often hear of people being described as "heroes" after their death. Ted Gullicksen was a true hero and he will be remembered as such.

by Randy Shaw

Ted Gullicksen, leader of the San Francisco Tenants Union and a key figure in the city's tenant movement since 1992, died unexpectedly on October 13. He was 61. Having spoken with Ted and exchanged emails only a few days before his unexpected death, I know I speak for everyone in saying that his death comes as an absolute shock. He died decades before his time.

I began working with Ted Gullicksen in 1992 on the Prop H campaign, which cut annual rent increases by more than half. For the next decade I spoke with Ted virtually every work day, often multiple times. Ted transformed the SF Tenants Union from a group that had never met its potential into San Francisco's most effective tenant political advocacy group.

Ted worked tirelessly for the tenant cause. He did the work of three people, which is why we all used to say he was irreplaceable.

Ted loved San Francisco. That's why he fought so hard to keep its economic diversity. Ted's fondness for his adopted hometown (he grew up in Massachusetts) was evident when he went from being a Red Sox fanatic to rooting for the Giants. But his thick Boston accent never disappeared.

Ted's Special Power

Ted Gullicksen never sacrificed principle for money. This was the true source of his special power. Since he could not be persuaded to act against tenants' interests for money, power, access or other offerings, he had an independence that increased his clout.

Ted was also a very highly skilled designer of campaign literature. I highlight this among his many skills because few realize the significance of his talent. No other tenant group leader over the past two decades has had anywhere near Ted's level of skill in designing the literature that told the tenant story to voters.

And realize: Ted never got paid a dime for designing campaign literature, even though consultants routinely get paid tens of thousands of dollars for doing so. And Ted never asked for a dime, either for himself or the Tenants Union.

Ted Gullicksen and Sister Bernie Galvin at a Homes Not Jails housing occupation.

Ted saved the tenant movement tens of thousands of dollars in campaign fees each election, boosting its electoral power. Or, more accurately, he enabled tenants to produce effective mailers and slate cards they otherwise could not afford.

And considering how much Ted Gullicksen loved election campaigns, rare was the even-year election cycle when his campaign lit skills were not put to use.

Ted never wanted an election cycle to pass without putting a tenant measure on the ballot. He shared my skepticism of the Board of Supervisors passing strong pro-tenant legislation, and I felt fortunate to be working with someone who recognized the importance of winning tenant gains at the ballot.

After tenant groups won their first San Francisco ballot measure with Prop H in 1992, Ted went after the third rail of rent control in 1994: the exemption of owner-occupied buildings of four units or less.

See **Ted Gullicksen Dies** *page 5*

Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground

The Blues and Social Justice, Part 2

by Terry Messman

"Looked around all day for a job,
and I looked almost every place.
It's hard to come home and find hunger
on your children's face."
— Juke Boy Bonner

Those heartrending words are not merely song lyrics. They are the real-life testimony of a bluesman — the single father of three young children — who is singing his sorrow about what it feels like to come home from a fruitless search for work and see hunger and deprivation on the faces of the children he loves above all else.

The verses composed by Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner, a gifted poet and blues musician who grew up as a sharecropper in Texas and lived in poverty in Houston for most of his adult life, provide an important clue into the mystery of why so many blues artists sing with such passion about poverty, injustice and homelessness.

Many of the finest blues musicians in history grew up in poverty — and some of them died still poor. Especially in the first few decades of the blues, many great artists made very little money despite their prodigious talent, and were forced to take menial jobs to make ends meet. Yet, that sometimes gave them the insight to create highly meaningful songs about lives broken down by economic hardships, hunger, evictions, and despair.

We can get a glimpse into this hidden dimension of the blues by taking a closer look at the lives and music of two brilliant Texas musicians: Weldon "Juke Boy" Bonner and Blind Willie Johnson.

The Ghetto Poet

Although almost forgotten today even in blues circles, Juke Boy Bonner was a remarkable poet and a gifted blues guitarist and singer. He sometimes performed as a one-man band, singing his poetic songs while accompanying himself on guitar, harmonica and percussion.

Some of Bonner's lyrics are poetry in the true sense. Even when he is near despair, his songs are beautiful and uplifting in the way they speak to the human condition. His song, "It Don't Take Too Much," offers a melancholy account of a beautiful loser, a man with a heart full of soul, crushed by the weight of the world.

Juke Boy Bonner made "Ghetto Poet," a great blues record on Arhoolie Records.

"It don't take too much
to make you think you were born to lose.
You got to keep on pushing at that
mountain, and it never seems to move."

The two sides of Bonner's identity as an artist are expressed by the titles of two of his finest records, produced by Chris Strachwitz on Arhoolie. His dark-blue, despairing side is captured by "Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal," and his identity as a poet from the poor side of town is expressed as "Juke Boy Bonner — Ghetto Poet."

See **Dark Was the Night** *page 6*

Seniors and Disabled Tenants Struggle for Fair Treatment at Berkeley's Redwood Gardens

"There is increasing enmity between the residents and management. This is much worse than all the other issues."

— Gary Hicks, Residents' Council

The main entrance to Redwood Gardens, a housing complex for seniors located on Derby Street in Berkeley. Lydia Gans photo

"We give up our rights as human beings by living in a place that will not consult with us, that does not represent us in any way," she said. "It's demeaning and disrespectful." — *Eleanor Walden, Redwood Gardens Residents' Council*

by Lydia Gans

Availability of housing for people with low incomes is extremely limited and even more so for seniors and the disabled. They are lucky when they find housing — any kind of housing — and usually only after a long wait. They are particularly fortunate if they are able to live in a pleasant setting and convenient Berkeley location.

Redwood Gardens, located at 2951 Derby Street in Berkeley, is a complex of buildings with 169 apartments, gardens and community facilities for seniors and people with disabilities. It is subsidized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). And there is an AC Transit bus stop right at the entrance.

Redwood Gardens was established as a co-op 28 years ago by Cooperative Services Inc (CSI). Currently it is managed by CSI Support and Development, which operates a number of co-ops in California. Redwood Gardens is the only development that now is not a co-op. (There is some history behind the change which is not necessary to go into here.)

The CSI Support and Development website outlines the principles of cooperatives. "Living in a co-op means living in a building that is controlled by the resident members. The resident members vote on all major operating decisions, including writing the annual budget.... Becoming part of a CSI co-op allows you to enjoy the benefits of apartment living while retaining control of your environment."

Although this ideal existed in Redwood Gardens in the past, it is far from the way things are now. The residents have no control over management decisions and even opportunities for expressing their concerns, and having those concerns heard, are being denied. And there are some very serious concerns.

Residents are afraid that much of what the project's management has been doing, and its plans for the future, will have negative impacts on the quality of their lives.

The residents have been getting increasingly upset with the management. Complaints, questions and requests are often simply ignored. CSI is planning to do major renovations, and they have already begun making changes while not accepting any input from the residents.

An attempt to block the conversion of a pleasant sun room next to residents' apartments into a laundry was ignored by management, and construction of the laundry is proceeding. Management has taken over the community room for the construction workers. They are making unwanted changes in the garden and other community spaces.

In the words of Gary Hicks, co-chair with Eleanor Walden of the Residents' Council, "There is increasing enmity between the residents and management. This is much worse than all the other issues."

Tenant Mary Berg wrote a letter to property manager Mary Kirk expressing her objection to a number of management's actions and ending with, "I have always considered Redwood Gardens to be 'top of the line' in senior housing ... but with CSI's management it now has fallen to near the bottom, because CSI (apparently) refuses to consult with the residents and disregards the expressed wishes of the residents."

She never received a reply.

Arlene Merryman has lived at Redwood Gardens for 21 years. "I'm really upset," she says. Her voice is shaking as she declares, "All of what's happening around here makes me so angry I can hardly talk."

Another resident, afraid of reprisal if her name is made public, is concerned about the lack of communication between residents and management. "I moved here a year ago, gave up my Section 8. So this is where I have to live for the rest of my life. I've been happy living in Berkeley being here at Redwood Gardens until recently with all that (has) happened."

With a zero-interest loan from HUD, CSI is planning to carry out major renovations. The process will be extremely stressful for many residents. The management or Redwood Gardens explained that they will renovate one apartment at a time, spending just one day on each unit. They expect to make major changes, remodeling kitchens and bathrooms, cabinets and shelves, possibly floors, etc. - completing it all in one working day.

And the residents must move their belongings out and store them temporarily (it's not clear where) for the day. There was no discussion held about the matter. A resident described how it all went down.

"Each person had a 15-minute interview. During that, they gave each of us a piece of green paper with all the details on it about what's going to happen. One of the things that is particularly disturbing is that we have to provide for our own help to pack. We either have to pay $100 for labor that they would identify or we have to have friends to help."

Vi McFall was on the waiting list for quite a few years before she was able to get in over four years ago. She is an artist and some of her paintings are hanging in the halls of the complex. (There are a number of artists among the residents displaying some exciting works in the halls.)

"I was happy here till a year ago," she says. "But it seems like the whole vibe of the place has changed." Pointing to all her artwork and supplies, McFall says she's very worried about packing it all and storing it out of the way during the renovation. She's sure there is no way she could mange it all by herself.

The management plans to begin the process in November. Taking into account weekends and holidays, completing the work on 169 units will take a very long time. Doing the math, it works out to almost eight months. For two-thirds of the year the residents will be living with the stress of not knowing exactly when their turn will come and having to cope with the state of confusion all around them.

Peni Hall has been living in Redwood Gardens since the co-op was first organized 28 years ago. She describes the residents. With a population of close to 200 people it is not surprising to find a diversity of opinions and attitudes among them. There are some people who live their lives paying no attention or simply accepting what is happening.

"Some people are intimidated and are afraid to speak out," Hall said. "Some are calling HUD, some calling an attorney, some talking with other media — reaching out trying to get help."

Also, there is a segment of Chinese residents who have limited English and there is no interpreter among them. But for everyone, the threat of eviction and becoming homeless for incurring the disapproval of management always hangs over their heads. Being seniors or disabled individuals with limited incomes, alternative housing options are extremely scarce.

Eleanor Walden is one of the people who has been reaching out. She expresses her outrage. "We give up our rights as human beings by living in a place that will not consult with us, that does not represent us in any way," she said. "It's demeaning and disrespectful."

Walden goes back to the days of the civil rights and anti-war movements. "There comes a time," she begins to quote Mario Savio.

When residents decided to sit in the sun room to protest the management replacing it with a laundry, she called their action a sit-in and got the attention of the media. "Now my strategy is to go to our representatives" she says, "to inundate the people who are supposed to represent us."

Walden points out that it's not just "asking for management to be more respectful.... This is greater than Redwood Gardens in little Berkeley, California."

What is happening here is happening in public housing projects all over the country. And there is a lesson.

"I've been saying the seniors are the next civil rights movement because we are the largest growing segment of society," Walden said. "We're the baby boomers. And so housing for seniors, especially if it's guaranteed by the federal government, is a good 'investment.' It's not done for any humanitarian reasons. It's a monetary cash cow."

Santa Cruz's 'Stay Away' Law Banishes the Homeless

A new stay-away law in Santa Cruz targets the poor, people of color and the unemployed almost exclusively. It is a not so thinly veiled effort to drive undesirables — i.e., people experiencing homelessness — out of our community.

by Steve Pleich

I discussed the need for a Citizens Police Review Board to provide a voice for people experiencing homelessness in Santa Cruz in my article, "Civilian Police Review Could Help Homeless People" [see the May 2014 issue of *Street Spirit*].

Although I still believe that a police review board would be an effective tool in combating the criminalization of homelessness in Santa Cruz, I believe that the events presently unfolding call for a shift in strategy from civic action to court action.

Santa Cruz Municipal Code Section 13.08.100 (as amended) is the most recent iteration of retrogressive lawmaking aimed at our homeless community. It is presently making its way through the City Council approval process.

The new law is an extension of an ordinance approved last June which provided for the issuance of 24-hour "stay away" orders to people who posed some arguable "public health or safety concern" within the city's parks and open spaces.

The proposed amendment, however, goes much further and raises serious concerns about the constitutionally guaranteed right to peaceably assemble in traditional public spaces, the right to due process of law and the collective right of people experiencing homelessness to simply exist.

As passed by the City Council on October 14, this amended ordinance would permit Santa Cruz Police Officers and City Park Rangers to issue "stay way" orders to "habitual" offenders which will effectively prohibit assembly or even physical presence in designated public spaces for up to a year.

Leaving aside for the moment the fact that this ordinance as amended targets the poor, people of color and the unemployed almost exclusively, the practical reality is that this legislative fiat conjured up by the council is nothing more than a not so thinly veiled extension of a policy to drive undesirables, i.e., people experiencing homelessness, out of our community.

Even more troubling than the broad discretionary power this ordinance cedes to law enforcement is the fact that a violation of an Order of Court as provided by this ordinance may be prosecuted as a misdemeanor and could result in a jail term of up to one year and/or a substantial fine.

Robert Norse, a longtime homeless advocate and founder of HUFF (Homeless United for Friendship and Freedom), said the ordinance enables law enforcement officials to banish homeless people from public places, even when they have never been found guilty of any crime.

"Since the original 13.08.100 was passed in 2013," Norse said, "many homeless people have been given one-day stay-aways along with their smoking, camping, or 'park closed' citations. This new law is designed to punish and exclude homeless people without the need to go to court and actually prove a crime."

Becky Johnson, another founding member of HUFF, provided some historical perspective. "The City of Santa Cruz has been progressively criminalizing homelessness for decades, but this new ordinance raises that policy to an entirely new level," Johnson said.

Here is where the need for a real discussion about new strategies to fight this elevated offensive against our homeless community begins in earnest.

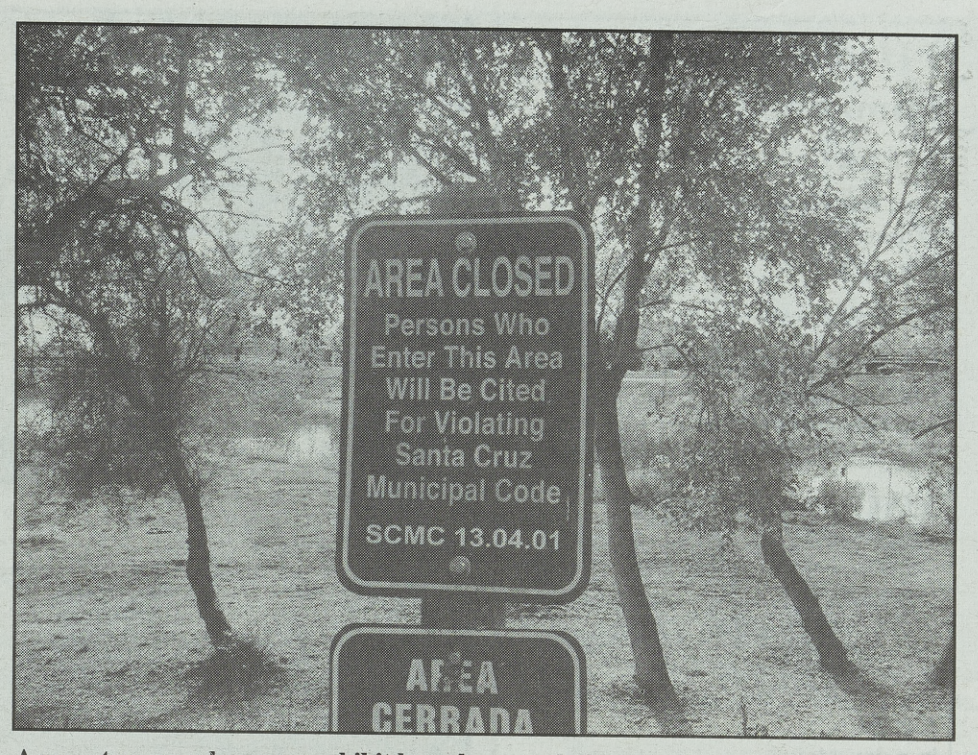
It is being argued by some that public education and outreach may be the most effective tool to bring pressure to bear on the Santa Cruz City Council to reconsider the adoption of this wholly punitive ordinance. It has been suggested that public "speak outs" and petitions may also be effective tools.

But while these tactics may be noble efforts in their own right, it is my opinion that the most effective tactic to bring down this latest attack on the freedom of speech and freedom of assembly in our city is litigation — in common parlance, a lawsuit. And while I respect diversity of tactics, history has shown that litigation, even ultimately unsuccessful, can be a powerful tool in the fight against oppression and the targeted persecution of homeless residents.

Linda Lemaster, a founding member of Housing Now and herself a defendant in the Peace Camp 2010 homeless rights case, illustrates the point. "The battles fought in the courts of law are as important as the ones we wage in the court of public opinion." Lemaster said. "And they are all the more powerful for the public stage they are played out on."

And here is something else to consider. The courts may do what the current City Council will not: they can simply "press pause." By this, I mean that a well-crafted argument before a fair and impartial court may well result in the issuance of a preliminary order "enjoining" enforcement of this ordinance until all the legal and constitutional concerns have been fully and properly addressed.

To cite just one example, the above-mentioned ordinance as drafted creates a high risk of "erroneous deprivation of rights" in that (1) the orders will be issued based on vague and overbroad protocols; (2) there is no clear or stated procedure to contest the issuance of any such order and; (3) individuals will have no meaningful access to due process of law before they are judged to be in violation.



A new stay-away law can prohibit homeless people from parks and public spaces.

Even the casual observer must concede that the law as presently amended is overbroad and poorly as well as hastily drafted. The council seems unwilling to consider the larger consequences of this law; a court of competent jurisdiction may well be.

While not committing to file a court action at this time, the local ACLU nevertheless issued a strong statement in opposition to the proposed ordinance.

"The Santa Cruz Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union is shocked that the City Council is considering a resolution of this problem that involves banning individuals from a park or parks in general, for as long as a year, without any due process or procedure for a fair hearing in front of an impartial judge as to whether they actually committed the acts with which they are being charged or whether the punishment is appropriate for whatever transgression(s) they are cited for committing. This proposal is Constitutionally vague, lacks adequate due process protections, and is ripe for abuse. We sympathize with your need to address problem behavior ... but we seriously hope you will find a different approach to addressing it."

Many will say, and perhaps rightly, that the courts are poor places for the pronouncement of public policy. I say that courts are not merely constituted to prosecute the guilty but are more properly employed to protect the innocent or, in this case, the disenfranchised and disempowered.

But like anything else, it is not the system that determines our rights; it is how we use that system. I believe that we can use it to our advantage. Fundamental due process requires notice AND opportunity to be heard. Among its many flaws, the proposed "stay away" ordinance provides no procedure or process by which any cited individual can be heard about the facts or circumstances of his or her alleged violation.

It is time for our local courts to weigh in and it is our responsibility to place these issues before the court on behalf of both our homeless community and ourselves.

It is a time-honored maxim of law that "justice delayed is justice denied." In my view, justice for our homeless community has been delayed much too long and we can lno onger allow it to be denied.

The welcome sign at San Lorenzo Park seems ironic in light of the stay-away ordinance aimed at homeless people.

Steve Pleich is the director of the Homeless Persons Legal Assistance Project.

Street Spirit

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I Had A Dream of Someone Falling

by Ellen Danchik

I am wandering, wandering.
Where will I go?
What will I do?

I have only a cart.

I start falling and falling.
God reaches out
and before I hit bottom
I fall into God's outstretched hands.

Now I know where I will go,
where I will go.

COLOR PHOTO

by Claire J. Baker

A child
in a devastated
garden
picks up a
war-ravaged peace rose,
trickles of blood
dried on the petals.

BLOOD SOAKED TEARS

by Judy Joy Jones

last nite
homeless woman
murdered on cold
concrete streets

people walkin by
pretending not to hear
her piercing screams
as she struggled to survive

her blood soaked tears
now belong to you and i

god's heart weeps
begging all to see
the poorest of the poor

last nite
homeless woman
murdered on cold
concrete streets

may our hearts
blaze with desire
to dry the tears
of the poor we see

god's smile will radiate
from shore to shore
when the cries
of those that died
awaken us
to helping
souls in need

we are created
to love and be loved
tenderly caring for the
poorest of the poor
until they are
no more

amen

CHOOSE AIR?

by Claire J. Baker

To avoid life's hurts
sometimes we choose
simply to be air.

But nothing's that simple:
ask air what it's like
to whip into tornados;

ask air how it feels
to bear scorching heat
from the sun.

Life's complicated.
The challenge is: how
human can we become

and still survive the process?

An elderly woman searches for her next meal. Dong Lin photo, One American Reality

FROM AN ELDERLY STREET COUPLE

by Claire J. Baker

Long ago we were Spring
in Vivaldi's Four Seasons.
Now we are Autumn

falling hard toward
Winter's cold strains.
We lag well behind

the processional
yet we remain
within its music.

Street Meditation

by Claire J. Baker

We live on a planet
that spins beyond
our griefs & joys,
hunger, poverty & war.

Our weight can't move
the earth & we don't feel
it tipped & turning.

The earth
from city street
so far & yet so near,
hard under our feet.

The Vendor

by Marilyn Wallner

He made me think
of those sad men who
sat on street corners
during the Great Depression
with boxes of apples:
5 cents a piece scratched
on a small card, or
pencils in a cup:
1 for a cent.
You've seen the pictures.
This man was selling
strawberries in neat little
square cartons: 2 for $1.
It was pouring rain and
his duck-billed cap
sagged giving old comfort.
He was dark-skinned
sturdy — Mexican perhaps.
Not like the pale, scrawny
depression guys though just
as honorable.
I could not stop then and hoped
he'd persevere until I could.

When I drove to his
corner later, he was
holding an umbrella
made merry with Disney characters.
I bought some berries.
He smiled and said "Thank you."
I said "Welcome to America."

DOORS

by Claire J. Baker

"If the doors of my heart ever close,
I am as good as dead."— Mary Oliver

Doors of existence, open wide
and wider still. Never lock out life.
Proceed toward the next unknown;
face whatever balm or gall
and all the in-betweens.
We are made for such encounters.

The next world will return us
to the grace we were born with.
But we have not yet reached
that full-circle place.

Fellow traveler, if you help
clear my path and I your path,
we can thank each other.
If not, still we can believe
or come to know
that expansiveness
helps spirit flowers thrive.
They sweeten the air.

Open wide, doors.
And flowers, grow!

Separate But Unequal

by Judy Joy Jones

I remember as a child
seeing two restrooms
for people of
different colors

and then I knew
why there are "art museums"
and "women's art museums"

it was only
in the '90s
female painters
were "allowed"
in college art
history books

let's see
separate art museums
for women and men
and female painters
denied a place
in textbooks

so I started
asking people
around the world
"Would you please name female
painters throughout history?"
and most could name none
or perhaps one at the most
there have been millions

and yes there are females
in art museums
hanging on walls — nude

and I wondered
why I was struggling
as a female painter?

Honor the Warrior

by Marilyn Wallner

Thank you for your service

and your arm

your leg

both legs

your nightmares

your marriage

your life.

LOVE FALLS APART ON THE STREETS

by Claire J. Baker

Why do you leave without me?
I never dreamed you would go.
I know this life's not toast with brie
but why leave now? What about me,
our plan that someday we'd flee
together where only the moon
will know?
It hurts that you're leaving without me,
waving, waving as you go.

Shrines

by Marilyn Wallner

These poles with ghost bikes
trussed to them —
piles of teddy bears, cards
candles with the Virgin's
image —
flower offerings
looking like brides' bouquets—
now desiccated.
The bouquet the girls' bike rider
will never catch.
I know about some of them.
That girl whose bike's
now spray painted white
was hit by a drunk driver
as she rode out
of the university gate.
She had the right-of-way,
cold comfort now.
That was on the late news.
And the two girls—
graduating high school seniors,
in the spiffy new convertible—
they were hit by a truck
after they threw eggs
at the driver at 4 a.m.
"They were only having fun,"
one of the mothers said.
Their pole stayed festive,
gay like a Mardi Gras float
for over two years
before it was stripped clean.
Someone from the county no doubt.

Where Is "Somewhere?"

by Claire J. Baker

Where can the homeless
harmlessly park, bother
no one, and get a decent
night's sleep — not ticketed
or routed out?

I'm guessing: maybe under
a century-old willow
or oak at edge of town?

Maybe on a crowded street
in a ghetto where
nobody gives a spit
about anything —
especially the homeless?

Maybe in a somewhere town
there's an empty, friendly
parking lot — SOMEWHERE?!

The Broader Legacy of Ted Gullicksen

Ted was as much at home in the world of bolt cutters and illegal squats as he was at City Hall. And he showed others that these two worlds were not exclusive.

Ted Gullicksen was an activist who worked both on elections and on housing squats.

by Randy Shaw

My tribute to the late Ted Gullicksen [see "San Francisco Tenant Hero Ted Gullicksen," on page one] focused on his extraordinary contributions to San Francisco tenants. But his impact was even broader.

As Sam Dodge pointed out at the San Francisco Tenants Union gathering recently, Ted brought activists from anarchist and other non-election-oriented backgrounds into the world of grassroots politics. He achieved this because he was that rare activist who had one foot in both worlds. Ted could spend one day lobbying supervisors over legislation, and the next occupying a vacant building as part of his Homes Not Jails campaign.

HOMES NOT JAILS

Gullicksen launched Homes Not Jails in 1992, the same year he got the Tenants Union actively involved in the tenant movement's drive to cut annual rent increases by more than half (Prop H). So while Ted was working with us on the nuts and bolts of precinct walking, literature distribution, and campaign literature production, he was simultaneously working with others to plan the takeover of a vacant building at 90 Golden Gate Avenue in the Tenderloin.

Ted was already media savvy enough to know that Thanksgiving is an ideal day to get coverage of a homeless-related issue. That's the day when people are supposed to be thinking of the less fortunate, and it begins the "Season of Sharing" that encourages people to be supportive of the poor and unhoused.

Ted's initial building occupations, done in conjunction with Food Not Bombs, combined his tenant activist focus. Homes Not Jails occupied 250 Taylor Street, a long-vacant apartment building that was supposed to have been renovated and reoccupied years earlier. The group squatted in buildings that were to be demolished (despite having the ability to house people) or kept vacant by owner choice.

Among those who joined these occupations was Sister Bernie Galvin of Religious Witness With Homeless People. Now living in St. Charles, Missouri, Sister Bernie recalled how Ted emailed her "during the week before Easter Sunday saying that this Saturday he and several SFTU members were going to illegally occupy a small apartment building in the Mission from which several very poor, elderly people had recently been evicted. He asked if I would join them in this act of civil disobedience. I replied, Yes! Ted, I cannot think of a holy-er way to observe this most sacred time of the year than to join you in this struggle for justice."

Sister Bernie felt that, "This man, Ted Guillicksen, with such a generous and justice-seeking heart and brilliant mind, can teach us 'religious' a thing or two about an essential element of what it means to be holy, about truly living our faith."

Ted was at much at home in the world of bolt cutters and illegal squats as he was at City Hall. And he showed others that these two worlds were not exclusive. Squats and grassroots election campaigns were both tools in the activist's handbook designed to further economic and social fairness.

UNITING S.F. PROGRESSIVES

Ted's broader impact was also seen in his uniting what I describe as "cultural" vs. "institutional" progressives in the city's tenants' movement.

When I moved to San Francisco in 1979, I was struck by how much more conservative the city's tenant activists looked compared to my prior experience in Berkeley. That was likely because San Francisco's tenants' movement grew in strength through Catholic parishes, whose members often did not share the lifestyles or values of New Left activists of the 1960s and '70s.

As the city's tenants' movement through the 1980s became centered in tenant counseling organizations, it became more culturally and institutionally mainstream. I felt by the start of the 1990s that campaigns for an entity known as "tenants" had become divorced from larger economic justice struggles. "Rent control" had become a technocratic concept drained of the passion that led to its enactment.

Ted always framed rent and eviction protections as core social justice issues. He got the cultural and non-mainstream progressive community on board, expanding the tenants' movement.

The tenants' movement today, and the tenant activists I saw at the gathering for Ted after his death, is much more culturally and demographically diverse than the movement pre-Gullicksen. And that will not change by his untimely death.

TENANTS POLITICAL PROGRAM

Ted Gullicksen also built the most powerful tenant political movement in San Francisco history. He institutionalized the winning strategies from the Prop H campaign in 1992, and then took the Tenants Union slate card to a whole other level.

Because so much of the tenants' movement was led by 501 (c) (3) groups that can't endorse candidates, prior to Ted, the tenants' movement failed to maximize its political power. Ted changed this.

Under Ted's leadership, for over two decades the Tenant Union candidate endorsements have been the gold seal of approval for the most pro-tenant candidates. A countercultural, left-wing Ted Gullicksen had no problem making deals with political insiders with whom the politically correct set would keep their distance.

Ted understood that the broader the reach of the TU slate card, the better for tenants. He would deal with nearly anyone if it advanced the tenant cause.

Ted may have devoted too much time to election and legislative campaigns at the expense of organizing a broader movement. But amidst an ongoing housing crisis, Ted understandably wanted to pass every conceivable law to reduce displacement. His loss could mean fewer tenant electoral campaigns simply because he is not around to organize them.

Ted never sought glory or credit. He would likely feel sheepish over the incredible outpouring of support that his loss has triggered. But all of us who worked with him know that Ted's recognition is richly deserved.

Randy Shaw is Editor of Beyond Chron and director of the Tenderloin Housing Clinic.

Ted Gullicksen Dies

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Recent arrivals to the city may not be aware of this exemption, which removed thousands of long-term tenants from rent control's protections. In those days, real estate speculators would buy four-unit buildings, do an owner move-in eviction of a single unit, and then decontrol the entire building within six months.

Few thought that the owner-occupancy exemption could be removed. The popularity of "Mom and Pop" landlords had created the exemption in 1979, and most assumed that voters would retain it.

I and other tenant activists were focused on improving housing code enforcement in 1993 and 1994, and we had our own November 1994 campaign (Prop G) to deal with. So while tenant groups backed Ted's effort with what became Prop I, it was primarily Ted and the Tenant Union's campaign.

Prop I made Ted a lot of enemies. We learned during that campaign that some "progressives" were also small landlords. They didn't appreciate Ted cutting into the economic value of their properties by bringing them under rent control.

Ted didn't care. He used to laugh when I told him stories about progressive activists denouncing him. All he cared was ensuring tenants in small buildings got rent and eviction protections.

Ted particularly focused on tenants in small buildings. Whereas the former Old St. Mary's Housing Committee (now Housing Rights Committee of SF) and my organization, the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, had a tenant base in larger buildings, the SFTU and former St. Peter's Housing Committee (now Causa Justa) primarily worked with tenants living in buildings with four to six units or less. So it was understandable that Ted would seek a ballot measure to bring them the same rent control and eviction protections of other tenants.

The 1994 election had the most progressive voter turnout in San Francisco history. It also occurred in the eighth consecutive year of a real estate downturn in the city. As a result, the opposition to Prop I spent barely over $100,000. I know that seems impossible, but the combination of real estate downturn and landlord overconfidence saw surprisingly little money come in against Prop I.

To the surprise of everyone but Ted, Prop I won. And it represented the largest expansion of rent control since the original ordinance passed in 1979.

STRENGTHENING RENT CONTROL

I worked on so many campaigns with Ted in the decade after the Prop I victory that I lost count. All of our campaigns for tenants prevailed. A landlord effort to reverse Prop I with their "Take Back Our Homes" initiative was soundly defeated. Tenants also defeated a statewide "eminent domain" measure that would have repealed rent control.

Ted and I also worked to defeat a de Young Museum bond because Mayor Brown allowed the full cost of the increased taxes to be passed through to tenants. I believe bond proponents spent $1 million to our $10,000.

During Brown's first term, Ted and I led efforts to win sweeping legislation for tenants. We got legislation enacted that would have stopped Ellis Act evictions, only to have the courts wrongly throw it out.

Ted played a crucial role in helping pro-tenant supervisor candidates sweep the 2000 return to district elections. Tenant Union endorsements proved the dividing line among candidates, and tenants could follow the TU slate card to ensure they voted pro-tenant.

The new Board created opportunities for strengthening rent control, which Ted pursued. He helped us in our campaign to save rent-controlled housing at Trinity Plaza, and did what he could to stop the demolition of sound housing at Parkmerced.

A TRUE HERO

We often hear of people being described as "heroes" after their death. Ted Gullicksen was a true hero and he will be remembered as such.

In my twenty-plus years working with Ted, we never had an argument. We never had bad feelings after a conversation. Our policy differences were minor. Ted was always someone who looked to work with people, not alienate them. That's a side of Ted many people don't know. Ted was the easiest person in the world to get along with, and one never heard a critical word about him from fellow activists.

Ted was a great person to work with. Let's not lose this fact amidst his many accomplishments.

Ted and I spent less time working together after 2007 when I shifted my chief focus from citywide tenant election campaigns to the Tenderloin and other issues. But we continued to discuss strategies to combat Ellis evictions and worked closely on the Airbnb legislative campaign. We spoke the week before he died about how to maximize the value of the remaining campaign literature for this year's November 4 election.

Many are asking where the SFTU goes from here. Bobby Coleman of the SFTU Board addressed that issue, and expressed confidence that Ted had laid the foundation for the group's stability and growth.

Sara Shortt spoke for all of us in expressing her profound shock that someone we all spoke to and met with regularly, who was so central to the movement, could suddenly be taken from us. A full memorial service will be scheduled and publicly announced.

Like Joe Hill, Ted Gullicksen would urge everyone not to mourn, but to organize.

Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground

Despite his lack of recognition, Juke Boy Bonner was a true poet and a hero of the blues. He is also one of the most prophetic voices of the homeless condition in America.

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In "It Don't Take Too Much," Bonner reveals how the blues can strike on an economic level — when you can't find a job — and simultaneously strike at an emotional level — when your wife leaves you. The inequities of a world that's "doing you wrong" cause the downcast blues by breaking up your home.

"It don't take too much to make you
Feel the world is doing you wrong,
Especially when you can't find no job,
You can't take care of your wife
and your home."

This poet laureate of the blues, as Brett Bonner (no relation) of *Living Blues* magazine once described Juke Boy, was also one of the strongest political voices in the blues, speaking out against the economic inequality of U.S. society. In describing his own tough existence in Houston's poor neighborhoods, this lone bluesman also became the voice for countless poor people who have found that the "upper-class people" don't give a single, solitary damn about the survival of the poor.

"It don't take too much
After you gave all that you can give.
Look like upper-class people don't care
How the lower class of people live."

In *Living Blues* magazine, Brett Bonner described Juke Boy Bonner as one of the most important poets in the blues.

He wrote, "If you had to choose a poet laureate of the late '60s/early '70s blues scene, you would be hard pressed to find someone more qualified than Juke Boy Bonner. Bonner's songs speak beautifully and forcefully of the struggle of African Americans. While many blues songwriters focus attention on themselves and their place in the world, Bonner's songs display a social consciousness that stretched far beyond himself."

After Bonner's marriage at a young age resulted in three children, his wife unexpectedly left him, leaving him solely responsible for his children's upbringing, a burden made heavier by his own poor health and economic struggles.

In the liner notes to Bonner's album, "Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal," Chris Strachwitz, founder of Arhoolie Records, explained how the burden was also a blessing. "Perhaps the most unhappy period in Weldon Bonner's life was his marriage. His wife left him after giving him what he considers the greatest gift in his life, his three children.... Weldon lavished attention, education, responsibilities, and affection on his family. They are all wonderful, lively, intelligent young people."

Yet his years as a single parent were also full of hardships. Even though Bonner was a genuine poet and a gifted musician, he often was unable to support his family with his music at low-paying blues venues.

In "What Will I Tell the Children," he sings the hard-working, low-paying, single-parent blues, returning home feeling empty inside after failing to find a job.

"You know it's so hard
when you're trying to make it,
you're living from day to day.
You go down and apply for a job
and the people turn you away.
What shall I tell my children, oh Lord,
when I get home? Tell them,
'Maybe tomorrow, maybe tomorrow
all our troubles will be gone.'"

He sings the words "maybe tomorrow" so forlornly, as if he's grasping at a slender thread of hope. What if tomorrow doesn't deliver on those hopes?

In another song on "Ghetto Poet," Bonner sings, "All the lonely days just seem to fade away." Then the days turn into endless years of broken dreams: "All the lonely years just seem to disappear."

As we will see, Bonner was not only enduring economic deprivation, loneliness, the pressures of single fatherhood, and disillusionment that his brilliant music never seemed to find a large audience, but was also enduring scary health issues.

Yet when a sensitive poet undergoes that level of suffering, even his despairing words can still be striking and memorable, as in his song, "It's Enough."

"Look like I'm waiting for a tomorrow
that will never come,
Seems days and days have passed,
yet I never see the sun.
It's enough to make you wish you were
never born.
Sometimes I wonder where I get the
power and the strength to carry on."

"I'M A BLUESMAN"

"My father passed on
when I was two years old,
Didn't leave me a thing
but a whole lot of soul.
You can see I'm a bluesman."

Those lonely and forsaken lines are from Bonner's self-revealing song, "I'm a Bluesman." Being a bluesman was at the very heart of his identity, and this song reveals the major events of his life as reflected in the mirror of the blues.

Weldon Bonner was born on a farm near Bellville, Texas, where his father, Manuel Bonner, was a sharecropper. His very first years seemed to foreshadow all the bad luck that stalked him all his life. He was born in 1932 just as the rural economy was collapsing during the Depression.

He was the youngest of nine children born into a poor family, and just as he sang in "I'm a Bluesman," his father died when he was only two. Then, Bonner's mother died when he was only eight.

"My mother passed on
when I was just about eight,
I started learning I was growing up
in a world of hate.
That made me a bluesman."

In his 1975 book, *The Legacy of the Blues*, the pioneering blues author and record producer Samuel Charters described the one-on-one correlation between Juke Boy Bonner's life and his autobiographical song, "I'm a Bluesman."

After losing both parents, Bonner went to live with an older sister in Bellville. Instead of going to school, he was working in the Texas cotton fields when he was only 13, just as he sang so movingly.

"I go to work in the fields
when I was just thirteen.
Didn't get a chance to know
what education means."

In 1963, at the age of 30, Bonner was hospitalized for chronic ulcers and 45 percent of his stomach was removed. During his long recovery, he began writing poetry and had countless poems published in *Forward Times*, the African-American newspaper of Houston.

Bonner turned many of these poems into beautiful songs and became a fine singer, guitarist, and harmonica player.

J.B. Lenoir was one of the bravest political voices of his era. "Alabama Blues" and "Down in Mississippi," his last two albums, have beautiful and outspoken songs of dissent. Both records have been released as "Vietnam Blues" on Evidence Records.

His music was championed, first by Mike Leadbitter, a leading blues researcher and writer for *Blues Unlimited* in England, and later by Chris Strachwitz, the founder of Arhoolie Records in El Cerrito, who released his finest records. Yet for all the brilliance of his artistry, Juke Boy Bonner would never become a star.

At the end of "I'm a Bluesman," Bonner sings the desolate and downhearted words that, in my mind, make him one of the most important and prophetic voices of the homeless condition in America. All the hard knocks he endured gave him the knowledge and sensitivity to capture the frightening insecurity of life on the streets.

"When at night you don't know where
you're going to sleep,
or where you'll get your next meal to eat
That makes you a bluesman, a bluesman.
I want the world to know
how come I'm a bluesman."

In "I'm in the Big City," Bonner writes of his disillusionment in moving from the hard, bare existence of a sharecropper's life on a Texas cotton farm to Houston, only to find that poverty had followed him to the big city.

"Here I am in the big city
And I'm just about to starve to death."

"I'm a Bluesman" appeared on "The Sonet Blues Story: Juke Boy Bonner," and his other songs appeared on "Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal" and "Ghetto Poet." Strachwitz produced all these intensely moving records by a talented musician and poet who otherwise might have lived and died almost completely unknown.

A HERO OF THE BLUES

Although Bonner never became a big star, he was a voice of his people, a wonderful poet and a courageous bluesman who kept playing even after half of his stomach was removed. He gave concerts and performed at blues festivals all over the country and traveled to Europe with the American Folk Blues Festival. But somehow, he never had a breakthrough moment in his career.

The life-stories of great artists in America are supposed to follow a rags-to-riches story arc. When a sensitive young man is born into an impoverished family of sharecroppers on a Texas farm just as the Depression ruins the economy, and then loses both parents, we are primed to expect that his years of hard work and brilliant artistry will be rewarded someday.

Yet, if the first chapters of Bonner's life were harsh and cruel, the last chapter was outright heartbreaking.

Even though he had written and published hundreds of poems, and had recorded blues albums of unquestionable worth and beauty, in Bonner's last years he held down "a dreadful minimum wage job" in Houston, as Strachwitz explained in the notes to "Life Gave Me a Dirty Deal."

"The last time I visited Juke Boy in Houston," Strachwitz wrote, "he was working at a chicken processing plant, depressing work for anyone but especially demoralizing for a sensitive poet like Weldon Bonner." Strachwitz later wrote that he would never forget the bad shape Juke Boy was in while working that job.

Then, when he was only 46 years old, Bonner died on June 28, 1978, in "the small rented room where he lived" in Houston. The last verses of Bonner's overpowering song, "It Don't Take Too Much" express the essential truth of this poet's lifelong struggle with the blues.

"It don't take too much
to make you think you was born to lose
That's why I lay down worrying
and I wake up with the blues."

Despite his lack of public recognition, Juke Boy Bonner lived and died a great poet — and a hero of the blues. As I write these words, I realize I am wearing a T-shirt with an iconic portrait of Blind Willie Johnson by the artist R. Crumb and the blazing inscription: "Heroes of the Blues."

For one forlorn moment, I find myself wishing that Juke Boy Bonner had also been consecrated as a hero of the blues, and that during his lifetime he had enjoyed some of the success lavished on so many lesser musicians.

From past experience, I know where these wishes will soon lead. I'll begin wishing for a world where the genuine blues artists like Juke Boy Bonner and Blind Willie Johnson are far more celebrated than the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin and all the others who have grown rich while exploiting the blues.

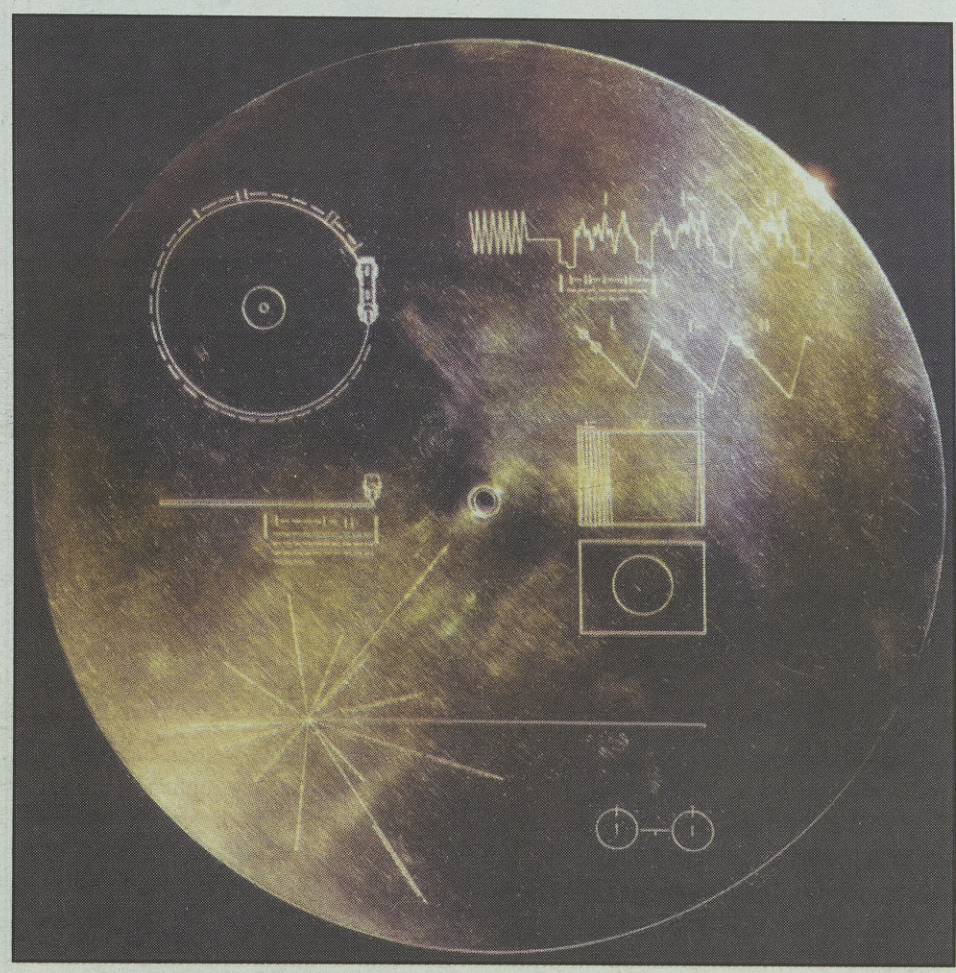
As long as I'm wishing for the impossible, why not wish for eyesight for the blind? In fact, why not wish for eyesight for Blind Willie Johnson?

Even though justice is too often delayed, it may still show up on some unexpected day. After all, one of the greatest musicians in our nation's history, Blind Willie Johnson, spent the last 17

See **Dark Was the Night** *page 7*

Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground

This beautiful portrait of Blind Willie Johnson by renowned artist R. Crumb was published in *R. Crumb's Heroes of Blues, Jazz & Country,* along with dozens of iconic portraits of musicians. Crumb's art also appears on "Heroes of the Blues" T-shirts.



The Voyager Golden Record was sent into space in 1977, carrying greetings in 60 languages, sounds of nature and the music of Beethoven, Bach and Blind Willie Johnson.

It is amazing to contemplate such a starry destiny for Blind Willie Johnson's music. He was born in poverty, blinded as a young child, and later died in obscurity. Yet his gospel music has been sent into deep space on the Voyager and has now become part of the "music of the spheres."

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years of his life in nearly total obscurity, playing his breathtaking music for strangers on small-town street corners, and then died a lonely death. Yet now, his music sails among the stars.

Blind Willie Johnson and the Music of the Spheres

In the opening frames of "The Soul of a Man," a film by director Wim Wenders in the film series "Martin Scorsese Presents the Blues," NASA technicians are seen loading a golden record on board the Voyager as it is about to blast off to explore the outer reaches of our solar system and then continue on into deep space.

The Voyager Golden Record carried the "Sounds of Earth" — the diverse languages, music and natural sounds of surf, thunder, birds and whales. Carl Sagan likened it to launching a message in a bottle into the "cosmic ocean." The Voyager Golden Record selected the music of Bach, Beethoven and Blind Willie Johnson to carry on this voyage into the solar system, past Pluto and to the stars beyond.

It is amazing to contemplate this starry destiny for Blind Willie's music, since during his life he seemed the most earthbound of men. He was born into poverty in Texas, blinded as a very young child, and later died in obscurity.

Johnson lost his mother at an early age. He would later sing a deeply moving rendition of "Motherless children have a hard time when the mother is gone."

During his youth, Willie Johnson walked down many lonely roads in darkness. He would die in much the same way, after sleeping on a soaked mattress when his house burned down.

Yet Johnson is now immortalized as one of the most brilliant slide guitarists in the history of gospel and blues music, and his haunting rendition of "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground" is now soaring into space. His music truly has become part of the "music of the spheres."

Many musicians win gold records for reaching one million dollars in sales (or by later standards, 500,000 units). Blind Willie Johnson's music is on the ultimate gold record, shining among the stars.

Johnson was a stunning original. Samuel Charters wrote that no one during his time sounded like Blind Willie Johnson as a singer or guitarist. But Johnson would soon influence everyone else. Musicians to this day are still devoting years of their lives in an attempt to figure out his incredibly beautiful and complex slide guitar playing.

In the liner notes to "The Complete Blind Willie Johnson" on Columbia, Charters wrote: "He was one of the most brilliant slide guitarists who ever recorded, and he used the upper strings for haunting melodic phrases that finished the lines he was singing in the text."

Sandblasted Vocal Cords

Blind Willie Johnson didn't sing the blues, however. Every song he recorded between the years of 1927 to 1930 was a gospel song, yet his slide guitar playing sounded like the very essence of the blues, and he sang loud enough to wake the dead in a rasping growl that sounded like his vocal cords had been sandblasted.

His beautifully expressive, yet deep and raw vocals remade gospel music so it sounded like the primal blues of the Mississippi Delta, as if the harsh, gravel-voiced singing of Son House had mingled with the intense, passionate vocals of Howlin' Wolf. Yet Blind Willie Johnson grew up in rural Texas, not Mississippi, and his music preceded most of the blues artists. Where did it come from?

Many of the finest guitarists in the world are in awe of Blind Willie Johnson. Some have spent half their lives trying to replicate what he could do on a slide guitar. How did a blind young man who played in small towns in an isolated area of rural Texas become one of the most masterful guitarists of all?

Ry Cooder, a virtuoso slide guitarist himself, described what Blind Willie Johnson's playing meant to him. "Of course, I've tried all my life — worked very hard and every day of my life, practically — to play in that style. He's so good. I mean, he's just so good! Beyond a guitar player. I think the guy is one of these interplanetary world musicians."

He's exactly right about the "interplanetary" part. Blind Willie Johnson's performance of "Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground," an instrumental version of a gospel song about the crucifixion of Jesus, was sent into space on the Voyager as "the human expression of loneliness."

Sam Charters wrote that Blind Willie Johnson had created a "shattering mood" with this song. Its full title is "Dark was the night and cold was the ground, on which the Lord was laid."

"What Willie did in the studio was to create this mood, this haunted response to Christ's crucifixion," Charters wrote, adding that Johnson created an "achingly" expressive melody with just his slide guitar. Instead of singing the words of the hymn, Johnson cast aside the lyrics and went for pure emotion, humming along wordlessly in a meditative mood.

Charters wrote, "It was a moment that was as moving as it was unforgettable. It was the only piece he played like this, and nothing else similar to it was ever recorded. It remains one of the unique masterpieces of American music."

Ry Cooder said that Johnson's performance was "the most transcendent piece in all American music."

Blind Willie Johnson's entire life prepared him to have the emotional depth and sensitivity to create such a deeply felt response to the crucifixion of a Biblical figure who was born homeless.

Motherless Children Have a Hard Time

Johnson's mother died when he was an infant. One of his most moving songs was sung with all the depth and heartache that a motherless son could find deep within himself. It is now a classic of American music.

His singing sends chills through my soul. It is a darkly unsettling experience, yet his otherworldly voice offers pure compassion to the motherless and fatherless children of the world. I lost my own father too early. And I love this song.

Children who have lost their parents at a very young age may be lost on some deep level for a very long time. And they may become lost in another sense as well — they may become homeless or spend their childhood days in poverty.

Every time I hear Blind Willie Johnson sing the last verse of this song, images arise of all the motherless and fatherless children who are homeless in modern America, and all the throwaway kids who are released from the foster care system with nowhere to go.

The most haunting image that arises is a picture of Willie Johnson himself, sightless and motherless, trying to make his way in the world by singing these words on street corners to unseen strangers.

"Motherless children have a hard time
when mother is dead, Lord.
Motherless children have a hard time,
Mother's dead.
They don't have anywhere to go.
Wandering around from door to door.
Have a hard time."

His father sent this sightless, motherless youth out with a tin cup to sing on street corners in small towns in Texas.

See **Dark Was the Night** *page 8*

Dark Was the Night, Cold Was the Ground

After his death, Johnson's music would streak to the stars. But during his life, this masterful musician suffered the crucifixion of poverty. Dark was the night and cold was the ground on which Blind Willie Johnson was laid.

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Johnson recorded for only three years, from 1927 to 1930, yet during that time he is said to have outsold Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues.

The Homeless Stranger

He sang hymns and gospel songs, yet as Charter wrote, these songs "have been so completely changed in his hands that they become his own personal expression, building on the great Biblical figures." Above all, Charters added, his songs reflected "the loneliness of the motherless child or the homeless stranger."

One of my favorite songs of all expresses the lonely life of the homeless stranger. Willie Johnson walked in darkness all his life and he must have known many lonesome days when all he met were strangers who looked upon him as a blind beggar, a homeless stranger. They had no way of knowing that they were meeting one of the most remarkable musicians in American history.

But whether we have encountered a homeless stranger, or a world-class musician, Johnson's song, "Everybody Ought to Treat a Stranger Right," is the voice of the conscience.

"Well, all of us down here are strangers,
none of us have no home,
Don't never hurt, oh, your brother
and cause him to live alone.
Everybody ought to treat a stranger right
long ways from home."

His song goes beyond a simple appeal for compassion. With his spiritual vision, he reminds us that another Stranger once was born homeless, because there was no room at the inn.

"Well, Christ came down a stranger
He didn't have no home,
Well, he was cradled in a manger
And oxen kept him warm."

This song is a reminder to a nation which just officially reported a record number of more than one million homeless children enrolled in the public schools that the lives of every one of those homeless strangers are sacred.

Dark Was the Night

Even though Blind Willie Johnson's records had been selling well, and would soon become deeply influential to other musicians, the Depression ended the recording careers of many great blues artists, including Blind Willie. In 1930, Johnson recorded his last song. Yet, he kept playing music on the streets and in church gatherings in Beaumont, Texas, all through the 1930s and up until his death on September 18, 1945.

After his death, his music would streak on its heroic journey towards the stars in deep space. But during his life, this masterful musician suffered the crucifixion of poverty. It must be said: Dark was the night and cold was the ground on which Blind Willie Johnson was laid.

In August 1945, the shack where he lived with his wife Angeline burned down. With nowhere else to go, they lived in the fire-gutted ruins of their home and slept on wet newspapers on top of their soaked mattress. Johnson soon died of pneumonia or, alternately, malarial fever.

There are so many haunting deaths among homeless people on the streets, premature deaths caused by untreated illnesses among extremely poor people with inadequate medical care. And there are so many haunting deaths in the blues.

One immediately thinks of the terrible death of Robert Johnson, slowly and torturously dying in 1938 after being poisoned, and Charley Patton dying on a Mississippi plantation shortly after singing "Oh Death" at his last recording session for Vocalion in 1934.

Blind Lemon Jefferson died alone in a snowstorm on a wintry night in Chicago in December 1929, and Bessie Smith died in Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1937 following a deadly car accident while traveling on Highway 61 from Memphis into Clarksdale. Elmore James died from a massive heart attack in 1963 when he was only 45 and should have had many more years to play his brilliant slide guitar.

Sonny Boy Williamson II died in 1965, a short time after playing in a juke joint with Robbie Robertson and the Hawks. During the set, Williamson was constantly spitting what Robertson thought was tobacco juice into a can, until he finally realized that Sonny Boy actually had been spitting his blood into the can all night, then returning to play harmonica.

Even in light of all these tragic deaths, there is something in the brilliant artistry and the forsaken death of Blind Willie Johnson that is deeply touching. He lived and died a genuine, gospel-drenched hero of the blues — not just when he was recording his immortal music, but in my mind, maybe even more during the 15 years from 1930 to 1945 when the sightless street musician continued to play to small numbers of strangers on obscure street corners.

How We Treat the Stranger

In remembering his death, an unwelcome thought arises: *This is how we treat the homeless stranger*. We have created a society where an unknown blind man is turned away from a hospital and dies in a fire-gutted home, not just in Johnson's era in rural Texas, but here and now, and in every state of the union.

Even today, we scarcely notice when a slum hotel in the inner city burns to the ground, or when homeless people die years before their time due to untreated illnesses and exposure, or that the safety net has been shredded so blind and disabled people are less able to survive.

Johnson sang, "Everybody Ought to Treat a Stranger Right," to warn us that the messiah may appear in the anonymous guise of a nameless, faceless stranger, and that the life of each unsheltered, needy stranger has sacred worth.

Then, he demonstrated the full significance of those lyrics by dying the unnoticed death of the unknown stranger, even though, in this case, he was one of the finest musicians of all time.

T.S. Eliot's poem, "The Rock," echoes with the same message about the stranger.

When the Stranger says: "What is the
meaning of this city?
Do you huddle close together because
you love each other?"
What will you answer? "We all dwell
together to make money from each
other?"

Big Mama Thornton was one of the premier female blues vocalists of the 1950s.

On his recording of "Everybody Ought to Treat a Stranger Right," Blind Willie Johnson asked us that same question, a question that will never go away.

Life in the Other America

When Michael Harrington discovered a land he called the "Other America" in the early 1960s, he helped awaken the nation to the existence of a vast and largely unseen subcontinent of poverty in the midst of an affluent society. His influential book, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States,* warned that 25 percent of the people in this supposedly prosperous nation lived and died in poverty.

Published in 1962, *The Other America* made an impact on President John Kennedy, and reputedly helped to spark President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.

Harrington's book may have been an early warning signal about the disturbing extent of poverty, yet long before he came on the scene, African-American blues musicians had been sounding even more urgent warnings over and over for several decades. In part, that is because many blues artists, along with their close friends and family members, were living in the Other America that Harrington only described.

Many blues musicians were able to give such powerful testimony about hard times, discrimination, hunger and homelessness because they had grown up in rural poverty, or lived on the poor side of town in the crowded tenements, crumbling neighborhoods and neglected streets of the Other America.

Many blues lyrics from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s sound today like highly knowledgeable and up-to-the-minute accounts of the present-day economic disparity between the rich and the poor.

The stereotype is that history is written by the winners. Yet the unbroken testimony of 90 years of blues lyrics amounts to a cumulative history written by the very people thought to be marginalized and voiceless. It adds up to a "minority report" on the state of the nation from the streets of the Other America.

The history that can be traced in blues lyrics tells the story of how the common people had the soul to survive a soul-crushing system. Along with a far-seeing awareness of economic and racial injustice, many blues songs also express compassion and empathy towards the poor and oppressed, especially in times when the government had ignored and abandoned its hungry and homeless citizens.

Hard Times for Floyd Jones

Floyd Jones, one of the finest singers and songwriters in Chicago's postwar blues circles, composed and performed some highly politicized blues, especially unique in the politically sluggish climate of the 1950s. His "Stockyard Blues" told the story of workers on the picket line, and not only sympathized with the union's struggle for better wages for those working in Chicago's stockyards, but also gave voice to the desperation of those who would have to pay higher prices for meat.

Floyd Jones was a gifted vocalist and his dark, heavy vocals resounded with passionate intensity, especially when he sang, "I *need* to earn a dollar." He sings the word "need" with such forcefulness that it sounds like a three-syllable outcry carrying all the weight of the worried blues.

"You know I need to earn a dollar
The cost of living has gone so high,
Now then I don't know what to do."

Jones sounds deeply distraught when he sings those lines from "Stockyard Blues." He sounds like a voice for the economic misery of a generation of African Americans who had escaped the poverty and racism of Mississippi, Georgia and Alabama, only to feel trapped in crowded slum hotels and low-wage jobs in Chicago's stockyards and factories.

Jones was born in Arkansas and began playing the blues alongside such masterful Mississippi musicians as Johnny Shines, Eddie Taylor, Howlin' Wolf and Big Walter Horton. Jones was part of the company of gifted musicians who brought the intensely felt blues of the Mississippi Delta to Chicago and created an amplified brand of electric blues, performing in small combos at the open-air Maxwell Street Market and in Chicago's South Side bars and clubs.

His beautiful music is criminally underappreciated, so much so that it is almost painful to listen to his work today and realize that this great musician was never given his due. In the early 1950s,

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Floyd Jones was one of the few musicians to speak out for the humanity of low-wage workers who were exploited by the powers that be. In a bitter irony, Jones himself became one of those exploited workers.

Big Bill Broonzy wrote many blues songs about poverty and racial discrimination.

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Floyd Jones made a handful of brilliant blues for the J.O.B. label, including "Dark Road" and "On the Road Again." He often played with pianist Sunnyland Slim and harmonica great Snooky Pryor.

His 1954 anthem, "Hard Times," was a soul-deep cry of anguish about reduced hours, lowered wages, poverty and layoffs. "This is a bad time," sings Jones, "we laying them off by the thousands."

In the midst of supposed postwar affluence, Floyd Jones was a voice for those who had been left out of the nation's vaunted economic progress.

"Hard times, hard times here
with me now.
If they don't get no better,
I believe I'll leave this town."

Reading those words on paper can't come close to doing justice to the deeply worried and agonizing vocal that Jones delivers. His impassioned singing not only expresses his despondency at the "hard times," but also communicates a sense of frustration and outrage right beneath the surface, an anger that seems close to boiling over.

If Floyd Jones was unusually outspoken in performing these blues in such a quiescent era, he was right in the mainstream of the electric blues in his singing and playing. Not only is Jones a gifted singer and guitarist, but he could put together a powerful band in the best tradition of the Chicago blues groups headed by Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf.

In 1966, Testament Records released an album in their "Masters of Modern Blues" series entitled "Floyd Jones — Eddie Taylor." Floyd Jones sang and played guitar with the powerhouse accompaniment of Otis Spann on piano, Big Walter Horton on harmonica, Fred Below on drums, and Eddie Taylor on guitar. Every one of those musicians was a world-class master. Eddie Taylor's guitar work was the secret ingredient that fueled blues singer Jimmy Reed's great success for many years. Otis Spann was the pianist in Muddy Waters' classic bands, and many consider him to be the finest blues pianist of all. Big Walter Horton was, along with Sonny Boy Williamson II and Little Walter, one of the finest blues harmonica masters of all time. Drummer Fred Below played on nearly all of Little Walter's hits and was perhaps the most in-demand session drummer of his time.

That's the company Floyd Jones kept, yet today he is nearly forgotten. Floyd Jones and this blues ensemble demonstrate the brilliance of the golden era of Chicago's electric blues in the '50s and '60s. These artists not only brought new life to the blues, but were the key inspiration for the Rolling Stones, Yardbirds, Animals, Cream, Fleetwood Mac and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers in England, and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Johnny Winter and Canned Heat in America.

Despite the great commercial success enjoyed by blues-rock musicians in England and America who were inspired so heavily by Chicago blues musicians, the black blues masters who gave birth to this music often could not even make a living performing the music that had made other musicians rich.

It can lead one to despair to realize that Floyd Jones, a beautiful and soulful songwriter and performer, recorded so little and died in near obscurity in 1989.

Pete Welding, who produced the 1966 Masters of Modern Blues record, wrote in the liner notes that Floyd Jones is "one of the handful of excellent composers of blues to have emerged in the postwar blues idiom."

The very excellence of Floyd's work makes his fate even more incomprehensible and bitterly ironic. It is a fate shared by many of his fellow bluesmen.

Floyd Jones was one of the very few musicians who spoke out for the humanity of low-wage workers in Chicago. His songs, "Stockyard Blues" and "Hard Times" are outspoken acts of solidarity with workers who are screwed over by the powers that be.

And then comes the final irony: Floyd Jones himself became one of those screwed-over workers. Here is how Pete Welding describes it in his liner notes:

"In recent years, Floyd has been working as a forklift operator, the latest in a succession of like 'day jobs' he has been forced to take to support his family. It is truly a sad commentary on the state of the blues in Chicago, where one of its finest composers and performers cannot earn a livelihood at what he does so well."

JOHN BRIM'S TOUGH TIMES

John Brim was another great yet largely unheralded Chicago blues singer and guitarist who traveled in some of the same circles as Jones. In 1953, Brim recorded one of the gutsiest and most political blues songs, "Tough Times."

With his wife Grace Brim on drums, and John Brim on guitar and vocals, "Tough Times" is a classic side of tough Chicago blues, but with a radical difference — its radical politics.

By January 1954, an economic slowdown in the United States had resulted in a nearly 10 percent unemployment rate in the black community, nearly double the jobless rate for the rest of the nation. Brim responded by warning that unemployment was getting as bad as the worst part of the Depression in 1932.

"Tough Times" has some of the tough swagger, and the stop-and-start dynamics, of Muddy Waters' "Mannish Boy," but it couldn't be farther removed in its subject. While Muddy delivered a growling vocal about discovering a powerful sense of manhood at the age of five (when his mother said he was "gonna be the greatest man alive"), Brim's song describes how one's humanity and manhood are all but destroyed by bad economic conditions.

"Me and my baby was talking
and what she said is true.
Said, "It seems like times is getting tough
like they was in '32.
You don't have no job
Our bills is past due
Now tell me baby, what we going to do?"

If only this song had been heard as widely as it deserved, it might have become that rarest of recordings — an anthem for the hard-hit working class. For in "Tough Times," Brim takes the side of countless workers facing layoffs and prolonged unemployment, and the hunger and desperation that were almost completely ignored in the mainstream media.

Brim's blues are a fearless report from the downside of American prosperity.

"I had a good job
working many long hours a week.
They had a big layoff
and they got poor me.
I'm broke and disgusted — in misery,
Can't find a part-time job,
nothing in my house to eat.
Tough times, tough times
is here once more
If you don't have no money,
you can't live happy no more."

OTIS RUSH'S DOUBLE TROUBLE

Even Otis Rush, the epitome of sophisticated urban blues, sang passionately of the terrible price of layoffs and economic hardships. In a thrillingly beautiful song he recorded in 1958, "Double Trouble," Rush's voice and guitar both wail with spine-tingling intensity as they lament how a lost job has left him destitute.

His singing is so intense that you believe every word when he cries out about laying awake all night after being laid off at work. This is the dark night of the soul, turned into a work of art by an absolute master of the blues guitar.

"I lay awake at night
Oh so low, just so troubled.
It's hard to keep a job,
Laid off and I'm having double trouble."

"Double Trouble," recorded for the Cobra label in Chicago in 1958, is another Eisenhower-era anthem about the layoffs and lack of money that plagued the black community in the midst of affluence.

Rush sang about the same troubles that many people living in Chicago's slum housing had experienced — no job, no money, no decent clothes to wear, and no sleep at night due to the worried blues.

He has "double trouble" because being laid off and running out of money has ended in his being rejected by his girlfriend. "You laughed at me walking, baby, when I had no place to go." It's bad enough to be homeless, walking the streets all night long, but when he sings of being rejected in that soul-piercing voice, we feel the weight of his torment, the "double trouble" of being broken both economically and romantically.

It is amazing how much this short song reveals about the ruinous effects of poverty. It is hard enough to undergo hunger and unemployment, but it is maddening to suffer deprivation in a society where so many are wealthy. The constant barrage of advertising and propaganda perpetuate the lie that anyone can become wealthy in a capitalist society. "Double Trouble" tells the real story.

"Hey, hey, they say you can make it
if you try.
Yes, in this generation of millionaires
It's hard for me to keep decent clothes
to wear."

In "The Sound of Silence," Paul Simon sang, "The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls." Otis Rush's song is one of those prophetic warnings from the tenements that society should have heeded. A society that neglects and abandons its poorest citizens is headed for double trouble.

In 1958, long before middle-class, mainstream America became aware of the terribly destructive effects of poverty and homelessness, Rush was singing about it in Chicago bars and blues clubs.

BIG MAMA'S LANDLORD BLUES

You know that times must be hard indeed just by listening to the large number of blues songs titled "Hard Times," "Tough Times" and "Ain't Times Hard." Big Mama Thornton recorded a shout of despair called "Hard Times" in 1952 written by the famed rock-and-roll songwriting team of Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller.

Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton had a big hit with Leiber and Stoller's "Hound

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John Lee Hooker said, "I look at the people in the streets, sleeping in the streets — hard time. I wonder why these people have to do that. If we get out and reach out to those people, it would be a better world."

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Dog," number one on the rhythm and blues charts for seven weeks in 1953, and Elvis Presley had an even bigger hit with it.

Thornton was inspired by Bessie Smith and Memphis Minnie, and she, in turn, inspired other blues and rock singers, including Janis Joplin. Thornton's own composition, the great blues lament "Ball and Chain," caused a sensation when Joplin pulled out all the stops and turned it into a wild cry of despair at the Monterey International Pop Festival in 1967.

Thornton was one of the premier women blues vocalists of the 1950s. On stage, she was an awe-inspiring blues shouter with a deep, growling voice that some reviewers found menacing and aggressive.

Chris Strachwitz, who recorded Big Mama in London while she was performing with the American Folk Blues Festival in 1965, found that she was an "amazingly versatile singer." Strachwitz recorded two albums with her backed by two different all-star blues bands: "Big Mama Thornton with the Muddy Waters Blues Band" and "Big Mama Thornton in Europe," when she was accompanied by legendary blues guitarists Buddy Guy and Mississippi Fred McDowell.

In "Hard Times," Big Mama Thornton delivers a powerfully convincing performance of a woman whose life is falling apart as she trembles on the brink of eviction. She is hounded at home as debt-collectors and landlords knock at her door.

She wails out the first line — "times are getting hard in the city" — as a dark cry of desperation that seems to come from deep in her soul. Anyone who has ever faced eviction will know how realistically she expresses her fear and anguish.

"Well I woke up this morning
Somebody knocking at my door.
It was a man standing there
Told me about the debts I owe."

In despair, she tells the debt collector that she is going to just give back everything she bought and start all over. But the hard times are only beginning, because next, the landlord comes to her door to badger her for unpaid rent. The landlord has already thrown many people out, and she sings, "I know I will be next."

Sensing her fate closing in on her, Thornton's anguished singing in the final verse conveys what it feels like when the burdens of life become too heavy for one person to bear.

"Times are getting hard in the city
I'm going on down the road
With this little money that I'm making
I can't pull this heavy load."

Rocks Have Been My Pillow

Melvin "Lil' Son" Jackson was a country bluesman from Texas who played in the classic style. Some writers called Jackson a throwback to an earlier era of the country blues. If so, what an awesome throwback he was. Texas had a rich heritage of blues musicians, and other writers likened Jackson to Texas bluesman Lightnin' Hopkins. That comparison alone is very high praise.

Similarly to Juke Boy Bonner, Lil' Son was born into a family of sharecroppers on a small family farm in Texas. His father, Johnny Jackson, was a sharecropper and Lil' Son didn't want to follow in his father's footsteps because he saw the injustices of the sharecropping system.

He escaped that existence by setting out on a musical career, recording for Gold Star in the late 1940s and Imperial in the early 1950s. He had several regional hits and a national hit with "Freedom Train Blues," but left his musical career behind in the mid-1950s to work as a mechanic and at an auto parts store.

One of the strengths of Lil' Son Jackson is his story-telling ability, delivered in a dramatic singing voice. Chris Strachwitz persuaded Jackson to record again in 1960, and Arhoolie Records released an excellent compilation of his music, "Blues Come to Texas." Strachwitz wrote that Jackson had "a beautiful guitar style and a haunting voice."

Many remember Bob Marley and the Wailers singing, "cold ground was my bed last night and rock was my pillow too," on their "Natty Dread" album in 1974. Twenty-five years earlier, in 1949, Lil' Son Jackson recorded his profoundly moving "Homeless Blues" for Gold Star records. Jackson sang,

"Rocks have been my pillow, baby,
gravel have been my bed,
I ain't got nowhere, oh Lord,
to lay my poor aching head."

In the next verse of "Homeless Blues," Jackson tries to hitch a ride on the highway, but finds that everyone passes him by. "Nobody seems to know me," he sings, as he is left deserted on the side of the road.

Jackson's song is truly perceptive in capturing the feeling of being rejected and treated like an invisible man — one of the most painful experiences reported by homeless people. Being made to feel like an outcast, an untouchable, adds a new level of emotional suffering to the physical hardships of homelessness.

The sense of feeling worthless and alone and unloved comes to a head when Jackson adds the despair of losing a lover to the torment of being ragged and homeless. It sounds simple to write, but it is truly amazing to see so much meaning packed into a few short verses.

It's a picture of a man's agony — and it's the poetry of the blues at its best.

"You know I'm ragged and I'm dirty,
People I ain't got no place to go.
I know you don't want me baby,
Lord you don't love me no more."

Big Bill Takes on Segregation

Big Bill Broonzy, the man who would become one of the best-known blues musicians in the nation, was born in Scott, Mississippi, as Lee Conley Bradley. His parents were sharecroppers who had 17 children. Broonzy became one of the most stylistically diverse blues musicians, constantly adapting to the times with an evolving musical approach that stretched from the late 1920s to the 1950s.

Broonzy began recording for Blue Bird Records in the 1930s, and was invited to perform as a blues musician at both of the heralded "From Spirituals to Swing" concerts held at Carnegie Hall in December 1938 and December 1939.

After World War II, he performed in England and Europe in the 1950s and became an enormously influential musical guide to a new generation of overseas blues fans. He also returned to playing in his country blues style as part of the folk music revival in the United States.

Broonzy died in 1958, but his life in the blues spans the years from his 1928 song, "Starvation Blues," to his prophetic condemnation of Jim Crow laws at the dawn of the civil rights era.

With real foresight, Broonzy captured the economic desperation approaching on the nation's horizon in his "Starvation Blues," written in 1928, a year before the stock market crash of October 1929. Even before the Depression struck with full force, the black community was in deep trouble and their growing poverty carried a warning of hard times to come for the rest of the nation.

"Starvation Blues" painted a stark picture of the hunger and evictions that were about to sweep an unsuspecting nation.

"Starvation in my kitchen
Rent sign's on my door.
And if my luck don't change
I can't stay at home no more."

"Starvation Blues" packs the entire devastation of the coming economic collapse into a few concise lines that warned about how unemployment would cause hunger and difficulties in paying the rent, followed by eviction notices and homelessness. He described this chain reaction of poverty *before* millions were thrown out of work during the Depression.

"Man, I ain't got no job,
I ain't got no place to stay."

As the Depression years went on, Broonzy recorded "Unemployment Stomp" in 1938. The song is almost incongruously jaunty and swings with the accompaniment of guitar, piano and trumpet, yet his lyrics are a distress signal warning that unemployment and hunger can break up marriages and families.

"Broke up my home
'cause I didn't have no work to do,
My wife had to leave me
'cause she was starving too."

Just as Broonzy had proven farsighted in singing about the nation's economic collapse, he showed himself to be just as prescient in confronting the racism and segregation of Jim Crow laws.

Broonzy had served two years in the Army, and was stationed in Europe during World War I. In his 1928 song, "When Will I Get to Be Called a Man," Broonzy voiced the discontent of many black servicemen who returned from fighting for democracy overseas, only to encounter the same racial inequality and segregation at home. He starts with a simple, yet deeply moving lament about what it feels like to be a second-class citizen, dishonored in his own country.

"When I was born into this world,
this is what happened to me.
I was never called a man,
and now I'm fifty-three."

When he returns from military service wearing his uniform, he is told he needs to get back into his overalls and accept the same subservient job as before — along with the same demeaning treatment.

"When I got back from overseas,
that night we had a ball.
Next day I met the old boss,
He said, "Boy, get you some overalls."
I wonder when, I wonder when,
I wonder when
I will get to be called a man.
Do I have to wait till I get ninety-three?"

On the liner notes of the Smithsonian/Folkways compilation, "Trouble In Mind," Broonzy describes how he wrote "Black, Brown and White Blues" about his true-life experience of on-the-job racism.

This historically important song was written long before the Montgomery bus boycott sparked the civil rights movement, but it speaks out so bravely about racism in America that U.S. record companies refused to release it. It was finally recorded in 1951 only when Big Bill went to Europe and a French company recorded it. It is magnificently outspoken.

"I went to the employment office
Got a number and I got in line.
They called everybody's number
But they never did call mine.
They say, "If you was white,
you'd be all right
If you was brown, stick around
But as you're black, oh brother,
get back, get back, get back."

He describes the constant victimization he faces, the lower pay based on discrimination, and how even service in the war doesn't lead to equal rights and respect.

Big Bill Broonzy's unconquerable spirit speaks out against Jim Crow discrimination in the song's final line. Keep in mind that the following verse was written long before the world had heard of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King.

"Now I want you to tell me, brother
What you gonna do
about the old Jim Crow?"

In 1956, Broonzy performed an updated version of the spiritual, "This Train (Bound for Glory)" with Pete Seeger, a version that can be heard on the Folkways "Trouble In Mind" CD. Broonzy makes the familiar song a civil rights anthem:

"There's no Jim Crow and
no discrimination.
This train is bound for glory, this train."

Eisenhower Blues

Perhaps the most boldly political voice in the blues world of the 1950s and 1960s belonged to J. B. Lenoir, a brilliant and fearless songwriter who took on an entire world of injustice by composing blues that fought against poverty, lynching, the Vietnam War, racial discrimination, police violence in Alabama and the shooting of James Meredith in Mississippi.

In 1954, long before anti-establishment songs became more acceptable, Lenoir sang his outspoken "Eisenhower Blues." His song was considered to be so controversial that political pressure forced it to be removed from stores and retitled as the less inflammatory "Tax Paying Blues."

Lenoir sang in an unusually high-register voice, and he played acoustic guitar in a boogie style he called "African hunch." His voice was a very expressive and unique instrument and he delivered powerful performances of some of the most insightful lyrics of dissent ever written.

"Eisenhower Blues" shows what a creative and daring wordsmith and musician he was. Even though the powers that be forced a change in his song's title, Lenoir's voice was not silenced.

"Taken all my money to pay the tax
I'm only giving you people
the natural facts,
I'm only telling you people my belief
Because I am headed straight on relief."

With "Eisenhower Blues," J.B. Lenoir broke away from the manufactured conformity of the Eisenhower era and sounded an outcry from the people who could no longer pay their rent.

"Ain't got a dime, ain't even got a cent.
I don't have no money to pay my rent.
My baby needs some clothes,
she needs some shoes
Peoples I don't know
what I'm gonna do.
Hmm, I got them Eisenhower blues."

The age of Eisenhower was also the age of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his blacklists and purges of accused dissidents. J. B. Lenoir voiced his outspoken opposition to war and injustice at a time when dissent could be very costly.

"Eisenhower Blues" had an element of

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J.B. Lenoir wrote several powerful songs that bravely condemned the racial violence directed at black people and civil rights activists in Mississippi. In "Alabama," he sang about how his brothers and sisters were murdered in Alabama, and the state let the killers go free.

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light-hearted humor, but Lenoir's song, "Everybody Wants to Know," is a radical warning to the rich that hunger in America could spark outright rebellion.

"You rich people listen
You better listen real deep
If we poor people get so hungry
we gonna take some food to eat.
Uh, uh, uh, I got them laid-off blues."

Many of his finest political songs were considered too controversial to even be released in the America of the 1950s. In his book *Nothing But the Blues*, Lawrence Cohn wrote: "Lenoir's landmark blues protest album, 'Alabama Blues,' dealing with racial violence, civil rights and Vietnam, was released only in Europe."

German blues festival producer Horst Lippman said, "At the time, no one was willing to release it in America because of the political content."

It took the intervention of European blues supporters to allow J.B. Lenoir to finally speak the truth about what was happening to black people in America. In 1965, Lenoir traveled to Europe as part of the American Folk Blues Festival.

Festival producer Lippman wrote, "I made arrangements that J. B. Lenoir finally should get his chance — without any limitation — to sing and play whatever comes through his mind, whatever he might think was and is wrong in the United States toward black people."

Lenoir was born in 1929 in Monticello, Mississippi, and as the 1960s began, he would have a great deal more to say about poverty, racism and attacks on civil rights workers in his home state.

THE NO SHOES BLUES OF JOHN LEE HOOKER

An astoundingly high number of the nation's most masterful blues musicians were born in Mississippi. In Ted Gioia's book, *Delta Blues,* Detroit bluesman John Lee Hooker offered his own reason why.

"I know why the best blues artists come from Mississippi," said Hooker. "Because it's the worst state. You have the blues all right if you're down in Mississippi."

As Nigel Williamson wrote in *The Rough Guide to the Blues:* "The social and economic problems of the Delta region persist to this day, the product and result of its history of enslavement and the legacies of the cotton plantation era, including the Jim Crow laws, racial segregation of public educational institutions and black disenfranchisement."

John Lee Hooker was born outside Clarksdale, Mississippi, and as soon as he came of age, he moved to Detroit, where he became one of the pre-eminent blues musicians of his era, with hard-partying boogie music like "Boogie Chillen," "Boom Boom" and "Dimples." But Hooker also sang the "Hobo Blues" about riding the rails endlessly, and "House Rent Boogie" about holding parties to raise the rent after being evicted.

Perhaps Hooker's Mississippi roots show up most clearly in his stark and terribly sad song, "No Shoes," written in 1960, just as the nation was finally becoming aware of the extent of hunger in Mississippi. Hooker's song reveals the story of hunger in America more tellingly than any Congressional fact-finding tour.

"No food on my table
And no shoes to go on my feet.
My children cry for mercy,
They got no place to call your own."

Hooker's voice is so sympathetic and poignant, nearly sobbing about the hunger and hardships facing his children. "My children cry for mercy," he sings, yet it is Hooker's powerful, deep voice that cries out for mercy.

It is fascinating to hear this king of the boogie utilize his rough, growling voice to offer such a tender and kind-hearted plea for mercy for his children. Even his raw and primal electric guitar sounds beautiful and mournful. It becomes another voice asking for compassion. If ever the most rough-edged brand of Delta blues can be said to be sensitive, this is it.

Hooker ends his short song with an unforgettable image — a picture from the Other America that indicts society's failure to care about malnourished children.

"No food to go on my table.
Oh no, too sad.
Children crying for bread."

In an interview in the book, *Elwood's Blues: Interviews with the Blues Legends and Stars,* John Lee Hooker said, "I look at the people in the streets, sleeping in the streets — hard time. I wonder why these people have to do that. If we get out and reach out to those people, it would be a better world. I can't save the world, but I cannot forget about the poor people working in the plants and the fields and buying John Lee Hooker's records. Wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here."

BORN DEAD IN MISSISSIPPI

As great as Hooker's song is, it would once again fall to J. B. Lenoir to deliver the most explosive indictment of the plight of children in the state of Mississippi. Lenoir's song, "Born Dead" is a blues for Mississippi, and asks a darkly disturbing question about why children are even born in a state where they will face so much poverty and discrimination.

"Lord why was I born in Mississippi,
when it's so hard to get ahead?
Every black child born in Mississippi,
you know the poor child is born dead."

Lenoir wrote that the black child born there will never speak his language, will never even know his mind and will never know "why in the world he's so poor."

"Why was I born in Mississippi?" That was not just a rhetorical question that Lenoir asked in a song. Just like John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and countless other Mississippi blues musicians who left the state of their birth, Lenoir left Mississippi for good in the late 1940s and moved to Chicago, where he played the blues at night and worked in meatpacking plants during the day.

Years after he left Mississippi and became a respected songwriter in Chicago blues circles, the hard times still weighed heavily on his mind.

In Mike Rowe's book, *Chicago Blues,* Lenoir describes why he left Mississippi for Chicago in 1949, at age 20. Lenoir said, "The way they does you down there in Mississippi, it ain't what a man should suffer, what a man should go through. And I said, after I seen the way they treat my daddy, I never was going to stand that no kind of way. So I just worked as hard as I could to get that money to get away."

In his song, "Down in Mississippi," Lenoir sang: "I count myself a lucky man just to get away with my life." He explained that he felt lucky to escape with his life because of the strange and deadly nature of its "hunting season."

"They had a hunting season on a rabbit.
If you shot him you went to jail.
The season was always open on me:
Nobody needed no bail."

His description of the Mississippi hunting season is a chilling reminder of the state's history of lynchings, shootings, and bombings, the assassination of Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1963, and the murdered bodies of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, found buried in an earthen dam in 1964.

In *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues,* Giles Oakley wrote, "Mississippi had a reputation for racism and bigotry from the earliest days of Emancipation; its record of lynching, reaching a bloody peak in the early days of the Jim Crow laws, was appalling."

Oakley added, "During the civil rights campaigns of the 1960s, the state was still a by-word for repression and racism, with several bombings and slayings..."

SHOT IN MISSISSIPPI

In 1966, there was a shot heard 'round the world in Mississippi — the shot that nearly took James Meredith's life. Meredith had set off on a March Against Fear from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, in support of voter registration. On the second day of his march against racial violence, a white gunman shot him several times. Meredith survived and days later, 15,000 people marched on Jackson in the state's largest civil rights demonstration.

Lenoir's song, "Shot on James Meredith" is a cry of anguish from the very depths of his soul about the shooting.

"They shot James Meredith down
just like a dog.
Mr. President, I wonder what are
you gonna do now?
I don't believe you're gonna do
nothing at all."

Few musicians ever commented on this barbaric act of terror, other than J. B. Lenoir and folksinger Phil Ochs in his brave song, "Here's to the State of Mississippi."

Lenoir reminded us that Meredith was marching to Mississippi to "lead my people" to "what he thought was right."

"Last I heard of my boy James Meredith
some evil man shot to take his life."

Lenoir also wrote powerful condemnations of the violence and racism encountered by civil rights activists in the neighboring state of Alabama. In his song, "Alabama," he sang about how black people — his brothers and sisters — were murdered in Alabama, and the state let the killers go free.

"I never will go back to Alabama,
that is not the place for me.
You know they killed my sister
and my brother,
and the whole world let them people
down there go free."

If Lenoir's voice sounds overwrought and nearly strangled by powerful emotion while singing "Alabama," there was good reason. In the Alabama cities of Anniston, Birmingham and Montgomery, buses were burned and freedom riders were brutally assaulted — several of them beaten nearly to death — by racist mobs of white people in May 1961.

On September 15, 1963, the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham was bombed by members of the Ku Klux Klan, killing four young Sunday School students in the terrorist attack. In March 1965, Alabama state troopers brutally clubbed hundreds of nonviolent demonstrators marching for voting rights over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Jimmie Lee Jackson, Viola Liuzzo and Rev. James Reeb were all murdered in Alabama during the Selma voting rights campaign.

Lenoir sang out fearlessly against the killings, police brutality, bus burnings and church bombings in Alabama that had stunned a nation. More than that, Lenoir captured the terrible sadness that gripped many over the tragic murders of defenseless children, ministers and idealistic young activists. After singing that his brother was shot down by a police officer in Alabama, he breaks down in his grief:

"I can't help but to sit down
and cry sometimes,
thinking about how my poor brother
lost his life."

Lenoir responded on a very personal level to the violence directed against the black community, not only during civil rights protests, but for decades in Alabama. By writing in the first person, he directly expressed his own grief and anger over the violence, and his emotional involvement gave his blues their deeply felt sense of personal identification and pain.

"Alabama, Alabama, why you wanna
be so mean
You got my people behind a
barb wire fence,
now you trying to take my freedom
away from me."

Even in his song "Vietnam Blues," Lenoir can't tear his vision away from the violence raging at home in the South. In what at first seems to be another of the peace anthems of the 1960s, Lenoir sings: "Oh God, if you can hear my prayer now, please help my brothers over in Vietnam."

But thinking and praying for an end to the killing in Vietnam only serves to remind him of the need to end the killing in Mississippi.

With lyrics like this, J.B. Lenoir was not only a blues singer. He was a prophet with a message of extreme importance for his country.

"Vietnam, Vietnam, everybody crying
about Vietnam.
Vietnam, Vietnam, everybody crying
about Vietnam.
The law all the day killing me
down in Mississippi, and
Nobody seems to give a damn."

Lenoir was a man who stood up to the challenges of his time. His last two albums, "Alabama Blues," released in 1965, and "Down in Mississippi," released in 1966, are beautiful expressions of his conscience. Both these records have been released as "Vietnam Blues" on Evidence Records.

Tragically, Lenoir died on April 29, 1967, only a year after releasing one of his finest recordings. He had just turned 38, another bluesman gone long before his time. His death was reportedly from a heart attack and may have stemmed from injuries from a recent car accident.

John Mayall, one of the guiding lights of the blues in England, wrote "The Death of J.B. Lenoir" to express his grief at the loss of his friend.

"J.B. Lenoir is dead
and it's hit me like a hammer blow.
I cry inside my heart that the world
can hear my man no more."

How We Find Our Silenced Voices and Learn to Sing

The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty has been observed since 1993, when the United Nations General Assembly designated this day to promote awareness of the need to eradicate poverty in all countries.

Jayy Castillo, Hope and Justice Coordinator for St. Mary's Center, delivered these remarks at the Oakland observance of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, held at St. Mary's Center in October 2014.

Story and photos by Janny Castillo

In my work as an organizer, I share stories that have inspired me. I would like to share one of these stories now. I will speak in her words because her words are best

1931 — Somewhere in America

When I was three and my brother was five, my mother and father separated. Neither of them wanted us. But my grandmother said, "send them to me."

My grandmother was very smart and wise. She owned the only black-owned store in a really small town.

When I was seven, we were taken away from her. We were picked up and taken to St. Louis to my mother's people. We tried to learn and become city kids but it was hard. When I was seven, something terrible happened. I was sexually attacked by my mother's boyfriend.

I told my brother, even though the man said that he would kill him. But my brother was "kingdom come" to me, and he told me he wouldn't let himself be killed. My brother told the family and the man was put in jail for one day and one night. Then he was released.

Then two huge policemen came into my mother's house. My brother and I were playing a game on the living room carpet. The policemen looked like giants. They told my mother that the man who attacked me had been found dead. He had been kicked to death.

I thought my voice had killed him. That was my seven-year-old logic, so I stopped talking. My mother's family did their best to help me, but they did not know what I knew, that my voice could kill.

Finally, they got tired of the presence of this mad, sullen, silent child so they sent me back to my grandma. That was the best thing that could have happened. My grandma bought me a five-cents tablet and tied a pencil on it. I kept the tablet tied to my waist band, so if anybody asked what I thought, I would write it.

Grandma's friend, Ms. Flowers, knew that I didn't speak. There was a library about one-tenth the size of the library in the city. Ms. Flowers said, "I want you to read all the books from a - cl, and make notes, I was eight years old. I read every book. There were many books I did not understand, but I found out that I loved poetry.

When I was about twelve-and-a-half years old, Ms. Flowers invited me to her house for tea cookies and lemonade. She talked about poetry and read to me. Then she said, "You do not like poetry."

I furiously wrote in my tablet, and said, "yes, ma'am I do." She kept shaking her finger at me, which I knew to be very rude. I was so upset I ran out the house.

Ms. Flowers didn't stop there. She followed me back to my grandma's house, yelling and following me around the room. "You will never love it until you speak it, until you feel it come across your tongue, over your teeth, through your lips, you will never love poetry, never!" She harassed me for many months.

Finally, one day I went under my house where only the chickens go, and I tried to recite a poem, and I found out that *I had left my voice. My voice hadn't left me.*

After learning about Maya Angelou's story, people joined hands in the spirit of community and compassion.

The Child Who Became a Poet

This child went on to become a world-famous poet, who won three Grammys, published seven autobiographies and spoke six languages. She received dozens of awards and more than 50 honorary degrees. She had a fiery, fierce grace and abounding love for everyone. She spoke at the President Clinton inauguration. She was asked by the United Nations to write a poem for the world.

She was born Marguerite Annie Johnson, but you may know her best as Maya Angelou. I will end with a few words from her poem, a brave and startling truth:

When we come to it
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear

When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.

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International Day to Eradicate Poverty

"On this International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, let us recognize that extreme poverty anywhere is a threat to human security everywhere. Let us recall that poverty is a denial of human rights. For the first time in history, in this age of unprecedented wealth and technical prowess, we have the power to save humanity from this shameful scourge. Let us summon the will to do it." — *Kofi Annan*

A dance group performs at St. Mary's Center in honor of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty.

IT IS I

by Janny Castillo

It is I, friends of St. Mary's,
who stand here in this place.
It is I, who once lived head down and bent
Suffering on hard ground
and hard times.

So bent I could not,
would not
dare to look up and see my light,
OR your light,
OR God's Divine Light.

A Light whose only purpose was to lead me
from my dark night
into morning light.

See my wrinkles, from too much crying
And not enough laughing
see my feet
walk slowly
so as not to disturb the deep pains
in my knees
and in my back.

I tell you though, I ran for years
through poverty-rich streets,
rich with violence and despair.

I ran
with longing
for dignity, for food, for rest.

Those days are gone, friends of St. Mary's.
It is I, who stands here in this place,

I stand here to tell you
that those days behind me,
are only that...

Behind me!

Despite what my history demands of me,
Despite what my circumstances demand of me,
I choose today to stand with you
To stand true, to tell you that
I am strong, capable and well.

I am dignity. I am courage.
I am loved by my Creator.
I am loved by my community.
I am loved by you, my St. Mary's Friends
And you are loved by me.